Her Unwelcome Husband

By W. L. George

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"Oh, this is intolerable," said Mrs. Caldecot, wringing her handkerchief. "Tell her I'm ill."

As soon as the door closed behind Maud, Caldecot said, "Well, you've had more than your time, so come along. Go to the desk."

Mrs. Caldecot was not looking at him. She stood, twisting and untwisting her handkerchief, seemed distracted. "Oh, what can she want?" she said. "At this time of night? Something's happened."

"You'll find out what's happened by and by," said Caldecot. "Hurry up; I can't stay here all night."

"Oh, Geoffrey, do let me alone," said Mrs. Caldecot, rubbing the handkerchief over her hot hands. "I can't think. Oh, do let me alone. Give me a day, just one day. You shall have what you want, but do—what's that?"

"Seems to be a fuss on the stairs," remarked Caldecot.

"Listen!" cried Mrs. Caldecot. They could hear the sounds of an altercation. A high voice cried, "I must!" Then Maud's voice, "But, miss—really, miss—she's ill, I tell you."

"Good heavens!" said Mrs. Caldecot. "She's forcing her way in. Geoffrey, she mustn't find you here."

"And why not?" said Caldecot, while a broad smile creased his thin mouth. "Am I not your long lost but happily restored husband?" He took out a cigarette with an air of negligence. "Don't do your friend out of this pathetic scene of domestic reconciliation."

"Oh, you don't understand," said Mrs. Caldecot, desperately. "She thinks I'm a widow. Most people think I'm a widow, and if people know you've come back the scandal's going to start all over again. Oh, what shall I do? She's coming!" Indeed, they heard Patricia say in a quiet, determined voice, "It's no use your trying to stop me I'm going to see her."

"Geoffrey, I can't bear it. You mustn't see her. I can't have it begin all over again. All the talk! You shall have what you want, anything you want. Only—oh, where? Geoff, in here." She ran to the folding doors. "Hide in the ell."

"Two thousand quid," said Caldecot, calmly. "Hurry up, or I'll add a bit on."

"All right, I agree. Only hide in here."

"Word of honor?"

"Yes." Mrs. Caldecot closed the doors upon the intruder just as Maud and Patricia together irrupted into the drawing room, both flushed, the girl with a face set like a little white mask, the maid indignant and almost tearful.

Mrs. Caldecot, in the few seconds of grace, had found time to collect energy, to make ready with a pitying heart, but with calm features, to receive an assault the cause of which she did not know; an assault of some sort, for which she was making ready with a sort of cold courage.

"Ma'am!" cried Maud. "It isn't my fault, ma'am. I'm very sorry, only Miss Neale"——

"That will do, Maud," said Mrs. Caldecot, gentle and even managing to throw her a little smile. "It's all a misunderstanding."

Patricia did not at once come further into the room. She stood with hands clasped upon her breast, erect and rather defiant. They made a contrast, those two—the big woman in blue satin and gold, massive and powerful, with quiet, gray eyes and thick lips well set; the girl, absurdly small in her combative pose, white and pitiful in her little dance frock of champagne georgette, that was cut much too low in front and exposed unduly her fragile shape, as if in London, at last, she had decided to exceed. Thrown over her arm was her cloak of black velvet edged with swansdown. Even then Mrs. Caldecot was still woman enough to realize that Patricia was wearing her Winter cloak.

They were looking into each other's eyes, already inimical, but hesitating, like two wrestlers seeking a grip. Both knew that even now all might be explained and covered up, if only nothing decisive were said; both were afraid of the first word, that would create a situation which must affect them deeply. So strong was this feeling that it was Mrs. Caldecot who attacked. And she attacked in a light, feminine way, of which the younger girl would, in her inexperience, have been incapable.

"I see you've come round between two dances. Was it a dull dance?"

Patricia stared at her. She hadn't expected to begin like this, so was led away. "Dance? Oh, yes, of course. I just got away for a moment. I had to see you."

As the girl stopped, Mrs. Caldecot found a little pity mixing with her anxiety. Then she resented this emotion and her words grew cold. "Indeed? I suppose you can explain this violent intrusion? I think my maid told you that I couldn't see you. But you seem to have insisted."

"Oh, Mrs. Caldecot," said Patricia, her anger and her plan disturbed by this attack upon her manners, "I beg your pardon. I know I oughtn't to have done it, only something's happened. You see, ten days ago Bob was thrown from his horse"——

"What!" cried Mrs. Caldecot, coming toward her. "Is he hurt?" She felt no enmity now, only immense fear.

"No," said Patricia, "not exactly, not badly; he's going to be all right. I thought you knew." Her voice became savage. "I thought, of course, you knew."

"Is he out of danger?" asked Mrs. Caldecot, as if she did not understand the imputation, as if her only care were the wellbeing of the man for whom those two were fighting.

"Yes," said Patricia, with an effort. "There's nothing to fear now. Only, you see, Mr. Sutton let him try a new horse—oh, never mind those details. He fell on his head. He might have been killed."

"Go on," said Mrs. Caldecot, tensely.

"It was ten days ago, and I've been with him night and day. He was delirious for two days."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Caldecot, as the girl stopped, seeming unable to speak. "Go on, go on; what's the matter?"

"He called for you all the time," murmured Patricia. Then, in a stronger tone, "Yes, he only called for you. I couldn't bear it. All the time he was saying, 'Claire, where's Claire?' Oh, I can't bear it."

Her voice suddenly rose to a shriek. "He put his arms round my neck and called me Claire. Oh, don't stand looking at me like that. Haven't you done me enough harm? Why don't you own up, Mrs. Caldecot? It's been you he loves. You know it quite well. Don't stare at me. You know it's you he loves, not me."

Mrs. Caldecot felt herself drawing up her shoulders, a faint warmth of pleasure in the contest came into her blood. Raising her eyebrows she replied, "Nonsense!"

The denial seemed to infuriate Patricia. "Oh, it's all very well your saying nonsense. Of course, you would. Of course, you'd deny it. You deny the things I can see, things that everybody knows. Now I understand all those hints."

"Hints!" cried Mrs. Caldecot. "What do you mean? What's all this idle cackle that you've collected to insult me with?"

"Oh, it's not cackle," said Patricia, bitterly. "You know quite well it's true. Why don't you own up and let me make an end of this. People have said things to me—about your being great friends. What a fool I was!"

"No, you weren't," said Mrs. Caldecot, quietly. "But you are a fool now. I think you'd better go. Don't imagine I'm going to take unlimited impertinence from a little chit just escaped from school."

"Oh, Mrs. Caldecot," cried Patricia, suddenly, "don't be nasty to me. I can't bear it." The energy she had collected for this interview seemed suddenly to exhaust itself. With uncertain steps she went to the sofa, and there flung herself, weeping, a crumpled little heap of delicate stuffs.

Mrs. Caldecot stood looking at her for a moment, at the curly head buried in a cushion, at a slim foot, gold-shod and stockinged in a silk which clashed with the frock. She was sorry for Patricia, but sorry in a strange, impersonal way, as if the girl were an object for charity, for which one must do something if one can, but without too much emotion. Also she felt helpless, did not know what to do. After a moment Patricia's sobs ceased, as if she had not enough vigor even to weep. She lifted up a little wet face and said in a white voice:

"Take him back. He never belonged to me. It's breaking my heart, but you can't help it. Take him back since it's you he loves."

"My poor child," said Mrs. Caldecot, feeling motherly and laying a hand upon a shoulder that first revolted and then lay quiescent, "you're not your self to-night; you've taken a silly fancy and it's upset you. Of course, you've misunderstood things."

"What is there to misunderstand?" asked Patricia miserably.

"When you've lived a little longer you'll know what the world is like. It's such a beastly world that it thinks everybody beastly. The world is so incapable of friendship that it cannot believe in friendship between a man and a woman unless they're ninety. The world's like that, and that's why all this tittletattle has arisen to injure your happiness. But it shan't; we won't let it. Take your happiness while you can; you won't often get the chance."

For a moment Patricia seemed convinced. She looked up into the face of the elder woman, as if she sought there a confirmation of her own desire. To be reassured, to feel that everything was all right! But just as Mrs. Caldecot added, "It was only a great friendship," Patricia, looking at her so close, impressed by her beauty of that night, the splendid gray eyes, the beautiful white skin, the splendor of the broad shoulders in their garment of violent blue, could not believe. She knew just enough of men and women to realize that no man could for many years have resisted Mrs. Caldecot, even as she was then. So it infuriated her to feel that plausible argument and experienced lying were going to overwhelm her. She revolted against the charm that was being thrown over her. Shaking off her hand and jumping up, her face rather near that of her antagonist, she said in a low voice:

"Friendship! How could you be friends with Bob and leave it at that? Oh, this is ridiculous. Of course, there's no friendship between men and women. I've known that since I was fifteen, and so have you. So don't stand there trying to make me believe that you haven't deceived me. And Bob's deceived me. I know all about it. Mother and I had tea at his flat just after we came back to town. There were two pictures of you in the sitting room and I found another in a sort of locket. Your face, years ago."

"Well," said Mrs. Caldecot, reasonably, "what harm is there in that? Bob's a great friend of mine, and he always will be—if you'll let him."

"He's more than your friend. When he was looking for something to show me, he took some letters from a drawer and put them on his desk. They were typewritten and I couldn't help reading."

"Typewritten love letters from me?" asked Mrs. Caldecot lightly.

"Oh, don't go on denying. I just saw two while he was searching. They were lying there on the desk. There was one from the cricket club asking if you'd arrange their social—as usual."

To Be Continued Next Sunday.